

Scenery Resource

Introduction

The Porter Mount Project Area is located within the Island Unit of the Swan Lake Ranger District, west and northwest of Haskill Mountain, within the the Porter, Mount, and Rogers Watersheds. Plum Creek Timber Company, State of Montana, and private lands border the project area.

Within the project area, the majority of the lands are NFS lands (11,111 acres), with only one inholding (320 acres) of private land. Elevations range from 6280 feet at Haskill Mountain to 3440 feet near Porter Creek.

Rogers Lake lies just to the west of the Porter Mount Project Area. There are numerous homes located on this lake within 0.5 miles of the project area, some with views of the project area.

Analysis Area

Spatial Bounds

The Porter Mount Project Area is part of the much larger Island Geographic Unit on the western part of the forest. The analysis area used for the Scenic Resource is the project area plus the viewpoints that extend to the northwest, north and east of the analysis area. Information used to evaluate the Scenic Resource was based on site visits by a Landscape Architect and the knowledge and experience of the effects on the resource by previous vegetation management projects. To streamline the analysis, two viewpoints were chosen as a representative of the range of views of the area. These viewpoints will be the basis for analysis of the alternatives. The viewpoints will be used for further analysis of the effects of proposed management activities on the area's scenery. The primary viewing opportunities for the project area are from the west side of Rogers Lake and the Browns Meadow Road. These areas are used moderately by local landowners for property access and the public recreating on State and National Forest land. These viewpoints are described in greater detail below.

Temporal Bounds

The time frames for this analysis spans from the implementation of the activities to a point in the future when grass, shrubs, and small trees are established in areas disturbed by treatments – year one to 20 years after treatment (2009 to 2029).

Affected Environment

The Flathead National Forest Scenic Resource is managed by direction provided in the Flathead Forest Plan (1986). Visual quality is assessed and evaluated under: National Forest Landscape Management, USDA, Forest Service Handbook No. 462, April 1974; and Landscape Aesthetics, USDA Forest Service Handbook No. 701, December 1995.

The Forest Plan includes management-wide (MA Standards) for the Scenic Resource as described below. Treatment activities for the Porter Mount Management Project are proposed in MAs 9 and 15.

MA 9:

The Visual Quality Objective (VQO) for this management area is partial retention, where human activity may be evident but must remain subordinate to the characteristic landscape.

MA 15:

The visual quality objective for this management area is modification or maximum modification. Modification VQO is where human activity may dominate the characteristic landscape, but must, at the same time, use naturally established form, line, color, and texture. It should appear as a natural occurrence when viewed in the foreground (0 to 0.5 miles) or middle ground (0.25 to 3 to 5 miles).

Maximum modification is where human activities may dominate the characteristic landscape, but should appear as a natural occurrence when viewed as background (3 to 5 miles to infinity).

The Forest-Wide standards for visual quality:

- In each MA, meet or exceed the recommended VQO. Where management area goals and objectives can be fully achieved and a higher VQO met without increased cost or reduced future options, the higher VQO should be achieved.
- Through the use of proper design and scheduling of activities, potential impacts on the visual resource will be dispersed and not concentrated with an area or travel corridor within a short timeframe.

Achieving the long-term visual quality goal on the forest will work in direct proportion to how well the cumulative effects of time and space are addressed. The time and space principles especially need to be applied to the key areas mentioned above. These areas are not viewed as a whole at one time; however, they are viewed sequentially from primary use areas, travel routes, or recreation sites

Existing Condition

The landscape character is generally of managed land and a high density of forest roads. Past timber harvest activity produced a mixture of intensively managed areas in the project area. Other areas have remained relatively natural. Vegetation is now found in different canopy heights and stand densities, resulting in visibly differing textures. Since the 1960's, approximately 43 percent of the project area has been regeneration harvested, and 23 percent intermediate harvested. Intermediate harvested stands retained the existing structure, typically having a range of age and size classes. Treatments that occurred previous to the 1960's would be mostly indiscernible, as the vegetation would be similar to surrounding vegetation.

Viewpoint Description:

Viewpoints used for this analysis were selected based on the number of potential viewers and proximity to possible vegetation treatments as described in the alternatives. These points are all located in areas or roads that are open to public use yearlong. The following describes the viewpoints that will be used for further analysis of the effects of proposed management activities on the scenery of this area.

Viewpoint #1 – State Section 30, northwest area of Rogers Lake: There is a clear viewing area of a portion of the Porter Mount Project Area just west of the private land on Rogers Lake. This viewing area faces Units 3, 10, 12, 15, and 21 -- the middle ground of the project area. This viewpoint also looks onto Plum Creek Timber Company Lands in Section 31. The existing character of the landscape from the Roger's Lake Viewpoint has been heavily altered on both Forest Service and Plum Creek Timber Company lands. Past clearcuts are evident, as are roads. Revegetation is occurring, and hard lines between young vegetation and older vegetation are softening.

Viewpoint #2 – Browns Meadow Road: This viewpoint is the section of road starting at the road crossing at Mount Creek to the junction with the FDR #2988. The Porter Mount Project Area is located to the east and the west of this road with private, State, and Plum Creek land

located in the foreground. These areas of land have been somewhat altered. Evidence of land management is the road itself and activities occurring on private land.

Environmental Consequences

Each of the action alternatives involves prescriptions and management activities that would result in a change from the area's existing character. Many of the proposed treatment activities are adjacent to previously harvested units. Silviculture treatments range from Clearcuts with Reserve Trees to Commercial Thinning. All of the activities of the action alternatives are designed to meet the scenery levels as designated in the Flathead Forest Plan.

Management activities such as timber harvesting can affect forest scenic quality by changing predominate form, color, line, or texture in a given viewing area. The degree of visibility of these events (i.e., visual impact) depends on the interaction of certain elements to the viewer such as:

- Slope and aspect of the land
- Surrounding landscape
- Frequency and duration of view

The analysis of the action alternatives focused on units that were assigned a Partial Retention Visual Quality Objective (VQO) or units in a visually sensitive area.

Alternative A – No Action Direct and Indirect Effects

Due to no removal of vegetation or ecosystem burning, the process of forest succession would continue. The areas that have been heavily altered by past timber harvesting would blend into the landscape over time, but would retain much of their current form and line for several decades. This is assuming the area remains unaffected by wildland fire. Alternative A would not improve or maintain the general health, resiliency, and sustainability of forest vegetative communities. Fuels would continue to build up from tree mortality and undergrowth, creating a higher risk of stand-replacing fire than the action alternatives. In the event of such an occurrence, visual change to the landscape could be dramatic. This change may be naturally appearing, but fires of large magnitude may be visually unappealing to some viewers, and could create vast expanses of even-aged stands with little visual diversity that would exist for many decades.

Alternative A – No Action Cumulative Effects

A managed landscape has remained due to past vegetation management, fuels management, and wildfire suppression activities. Visibility of some of these features would continue. Similar actions to reduce fuels buildup and thinning may occur on surrounding State or private lands within this project area. Riparian areas for the most part would likely be left untreated. Cumulative effects to the Scenic Resource would include changes to the shapes and textures on the landscape seen from Viewpoints discussed above.

Alternatives B and C Direct & Indirect Effects

Effects on scenery from timber harvest and related activities would vary in duration and intensity corresponding to the tree cover left on site after harvesting. The clearcut with reserve trees and seed tree prescriptions leave the least amount of vegetation and therefore creates contrasts between natural and managed landscapes. This can vary depending on the viewer's location, steepness of the

slope, and the position of the harvested area on the slope. The commercial thin, salvage, sanitation, and thin from below treatments leave more vegetation and appear more natural over time and add variety to the scenery. This is especially true when these methods are used adjacent to older harvested areas.

The longest lasting visual disturbance resulting from activities proposed in this project would be soil exposure and displacement from skyline corridors. With skyline logging systems occurring in Commercial Thin Units, there would be multiple vertical cable set-ups that are located perpendicular to the road. Some of these would be oblique views (blend in better with the landscape) to the viewpoint and others would be direct to the viewpoint. There may be some ground disturbance with partial suspension when tree ends are dragged in the cable corridor. The ground disturbance may be visible for up to 5 years as recovery takes about 1 to 5 years for ground cover to be established, longer for trees to become established (15 to 20 years). Commercial Thinning removes about 50 percent of tree cover (or 50 to 100 trees per acre), so the existing 50 percent tree cover should provide some screening of the visible cable corridors. The cable corridors would be closely spaced close, allowing existing vegetation to screen portions of the cable corridors. **Tractor logging** is proposed in many units and occurs on slopes less than 35 percent grade and generally do not have straight corridors. Tractor units usually do not pose a visual concern. **Helicopter logging** is proposed in some harvest units and pose no visual concerns. All landings and temporary roads would be removed from the landscape and rehabilitated after timber harvest activities are completed to a natural appearing condition.

A. Units Assigned a Partial Retention Visual Quality Objective

Six units (1, 2, 15, 32, 36, and 52) were assigned a partial retention VQO where human activity may be evident but must remain subordinate to the characteristic landscape as they are located in Management Area 9. Design Criteria would be implemented during unit boundary layout so to blend the units with the characteristic landscape (See Table 2-13).

Unit 1: This unit cannot be seen from any of the viewpoints. The proposed treatment for this unit is an Ecosystem Burn occurring in a mosaic pattern across the unit. This proposed burn is designed to replicate the role of natural fire (moderately frequent/low intensity fires). Some hand slashing would be done on about 60 acres within the interior of the unit and should not be discernable. As a result of this proposed treatment, there would be short-term effects red and black patches of trees; it should mimic natural fire processes. This unit would meet the partial retention VQO.

Unit 2: The proposed treatment for this unit is Commercial Thinning using both skyline (cable) and tractor logging systems; it is not visible from any of the viewpoints. However, this unit is adjacent to private land, sits low in elevation, and can be seen from adjacent private land. Design Criteria would be implemented to reduce the impacts of skyline logging as seen from the adjacent private land such as evaluating cable corridors post harvest to determine the need to lop and scatter slash to visually break up vertical lines created by cable corridors. In addition, where feasible, exposed mineral soils would be covered or mulched with slash following harvest operations (See Table 2-14).

There are rocky outcroppings scattered throughout the unit with grassy openings that add visual diversity. With Alternative B, skyline logging would occur on about 27 acres or 18 percent of the unit. About 127 acres of the unit (82 percent) would be tractor logged. Alternative B also proposes 1.47 miles of temporary road construction. As discussed above, temporary roads would be removed from the landscape and rehabilitated after timber harvest activities are completed.

Alternative C proposes skyline logging on about 10 acres or 13 percent of Unit 2. Helicopter logging is proposed on 134 acres or 87 percent of the unit which poses no visual concerns. There

is no temporary road construction in this alternative. This unit would meet the partial retention VQO in both alternatives.

Unit 15: The proposed treatment for this unit is Commercial Thinning using both tractor and skyline (cable) logging systems. This unit is adjacent to Plum Creek Timber Company land, and only a small portion that is proposed for cable logging would be visible from the Rogers Lake Viewpoint. The remainder of unit has a gentle slope and cannot easily be seen from the viewpoint.

Under both Alternatives B and C, skyline logging would occur on about 15 acres or 19 percent of Unit 15. Cable corridors would be closely spaced to increase control of the skyline cable to better ensure protection of residual stand and allow existing vegetation to screen portions of the cable corridors (See Table 2-14). About 66 acres of the unit (81 percent) would be tractor logged. This unit would meet partial retention VQO.

Unit 32: Mature trees along the Brown’s Meadow Road prevent views into this unit from the road. The proposed treatment for this unit is Commercial Thinning, using both skyline (cable) and tractor logging systems. Twenty-four acres of the 31 acres are in a partial retention VQO but for analysis purposes, the entire 31 acres will be analyzed as partial retention VQO.

Both Alternative B and C propose about 24 acres of Unit 32 (77 percent) that would be cable logged and 7 acres (13 percent) that would be skyline/tractor logged. Cable corridors would be closely spaced to increase control of the skyline cable to better ensure protection of residual stand and allow existing vegetation to screen portions of the cable corridors. This unit would meet partial retention VQO in both alternatives.

Unit 36: Mature trees along the Brown’s Meadow Road prevent views into this unit from the road. The proposed treatment for this unit is Commercial Thinning using both skyline (cable) and tractor logging.

Under both Alternative B and Alternative C, less than 9 acres (26 percent) of the unit would be cable logged. Cable corridors would be closely spaced to increase control of the skyline cable to better ensure protection of residual stand and allow existing vegetation to screen portions of the cable corridors. About 26 acres (74 percent) of the unit would be tractor logged. There is also 0.22 miles of temporary road construction. This unit would meet partial retention VQO in both alternatives.

Unit 52: Mature trees along the Brown’s Meadow Road prevent views into this unit from the road. The proposed treatment for Unit 52 is a Sanitation harvest using a tractor logging system in both alternatives. Sanitation harvest generally removes infected or high risk trees from the overstory and leaves about 50 percent of the canopy cover. This unit would meet partial retention VQO.

**TABLE 3-45
EFFECTS OF ALTERNATIVES B AND C.
UNITS SEEN FROM VIEWPOINTS #1 and 2**

Unit #	Alternative	VQO Prescription	Meets VQO
1	B and C	Partial Retention	Yes
2	B and C	Partial Retention	Yes
15	B and C	Partial Retention	Yes
32	B and C	Partial Retention	Yes
36	B and C	Partial Retention	Yes
52	B and C	Partial Retention	Yes

B. Units Assigned a Modification Visual Quality Objective but Considered Visually Sensitive

Unit 12: This unit can be seen from the Roger's Lake Viewpoint. A Seed Tree Harvest treatment is proposed using both skyline (cable) and tractor logging systems for both Alternative B and C. Seed Tree harvest would retain 5 to 15 large trees per acres. About 25 acres (86 percent) of the unit would be cable logged. Four acres (14 percent) of Unit 12 would be tractor logged. An underburn is proposed for fuel reduction, which should soften and blend the cable corridors.

Because of the percent removed from the canopy, the north boundary line would stand out on the landscape. In order to reduce the effect of straight lines, feathering the north boundary into the unit has been incorporated into the Design Criteria and is displayed in Table 2-14 of Chapter 2.

Unit 21: This unit can be seen from the Rogers Lake Viewpoint. The proposed treatment for this unit for Alternative B and C is Clearcut with Reserve Trees using a skyline (cable) logging system. A clearcut with Reserve Trees treatment generally removes the majority of the trees, retaining any western larch or ponderosa pine that is present. About 22 acres would be cable logged. Because of the percent removed from the canopy, the north and south boundary lines would stand out on the landscape. In order to reduce the effect of straight lines, feathering the north and south boundaries into the unit has been incorporated into the Design Criteria and is displayed in Table 2-13 in Chapter 2.

**Alternatives B and C
Cumulative Effects**

As discussed above, a managed landscape has remained due to vegetation management, fuels management, and wildfire suppression activities from past activities. Visibility of some of these features would continue. Similar actions to reduce fuels buildup and thinning may occur on surrounding State or private lands within this project area. Riparian areas for the most part would likely be left untreated.

Both action alternatives would leave varying amounts of trees within all harvest units and the one ecosystem burn unit. Regeneration of both conifers and broadleaf species would help screen out views of stumps and debris within five to ten years. In addition, encouraging natural and planted western larch in regeneration harvest units would help add interest with a difference in color and texture, especially viewed from the middleground and background. Cumulative effects to the Scenic Resource would include changes to the shapes and textures on the landscape seen from Viewpoints discussed above.

Regulatory Framework and Consistency

All alternatives would meet Forest Plan standards, with the incorporation of recommended Design Criteria. The VQOs would be met within one year of final activities associated with implementing the Porter Mount Management Project.